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Another Sandhill Crane Breeding Record in the Eastern Rainwater Basin

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Jorgensen (2002) recently summarized breeding-season occurrences of the Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis*) in the Eastern Rainwater Basin (eRWB). Summering birds were first detected in 1992 (*The Nebraska Bird Review* 60:145). Breeding first occurred in 1994 with four additional nesting or breeding records in subsequent years. The most recent breeding records were in 1999 when breeding activity was detected at both Kissinger Basin Wildlife Management Area (WMA) (Hoffman 1999) and Harvard Waterfowl Production Area (WPA) (Silcock and Jorgensen 1999), both in Clay County. Since late 1999 the eRWB has experienced persistent drought. This has affected wetland conditions because water levels are dictated by precipitation. Breeding-season observations have been less frequent during these drier years suggesting birds may have abandoned individual wetlands and the region. Variable wetland conditions caused by fluctuations in precipitation is what led Jorgensen (2002) to question whether breeding in the eRWB would be sporadic and possibly even limited to the short period in the 1990s. An additional 2003 breeding record answers, at least partially, some of the questions regarding the Sandhill Crane's status in the eRWB. I summarize this recent record below.

Drought persisted into 2003, and many eRWB wetlands had below normal water levels or were dry. Drought was less intense in southeast sections of the

eRWB and a few wetlands in that area, including Mallard Haven WPA, had persistent water through much of the spring. This was supplemented by heavy rains in mid-June. On the morning of 28 June 2003, I visited Mallard Haven WPA in Fillmore County and viewed the wetland from the east side. The water level appeared normal and the wetland was dominated by emergent vegetation, primarily bulrush (*Scirpus* spp.). Approximately 100 head of cattle were grazing the wetland, thereby reducing the vegetation density. While scoping the wetland I saw a bird with a long, pale gray neck and head, a red crown, and a long, dark bill visible above the vegetation approximately a half mile from where I was located. I immediately recognized the bird as an adult Sandhill Crane. Moments later I saw a similar bird with a pale, rusty-colored neck and a pale bill, which I recognized as a juvenile Sandhill Crane. I then noted another juvenile and a second adult. I noticed that one adult was leading the group and the other adult followed behind, indicating that this was a family group. Furthermore, despite my distance from the birds, the group was very wary and difficult to follow despite their size. The birds were not observed in flight, but the juveniles appeared to be at flight stage or nearly so. Despite this observation, I was unable to detect the family group on later visits to the wetland and surrounding area. My only other 2003 eRWB breeding-season observation was a lone adult crane at a cattle feedlot adjacent to Sinninger WPA, York County, on 12 July 2003.

The above record is the sixth breeding or nesting record for the species in the eRWB in the last decade. Breeding has not been detected anywhere else in Nebraska in over a century, despite regional increases. This is also the first known breeding record in Fillmore County. It is possible that the pair nested at another wetland in the region and moved to Mallard Haven. This is unlikely, however, because Mallard Haven was the only large wetland that had adequate water and favorable conditions throughout spring and early summer. Sandhill Cranes require large, undisturbed areas with a variety of wetland and grassland habitats for breeding (Tacha et al. 1992). Mallard Haven totals nearly 900 acres and is similar in size to the other two sites, Kissinger Basin WMA and Harvard WPA, where breeding has occurred in the eRWB. This pair also apparently fledged two young, an indication of favorable conditions at Mallard Haven, as the species rarely fledges more than one chick except in a years of abundant food (Tacha et al. 1992).

The few large wetlands that are presumably favorable for breeding Sandhill Cranes likely limit the region to only a few pairs. This factor, along with the dynamic habitat conditions, raises questions about whether the Sandhill Crane will maintain its foothold in the eRWB. This latest breeding record during a period of prolonged drought serves as a harbinger that the Sandhill Crane may indeed become a permanent fixture of the eRWB's breeding avifauna.

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